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SUBJECT Interview With Frank Snepp

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY: The book that is causing so much excitement, concern and fury, and, some people think, not nearly so much indignation as would be appropriate is called "Decent Interval." That disdainful title reiterates a famous observation by Henry Kissinger, then Secretary of State, to the effect that he hoped that the Paris Accords would provide a decent interval of self-determination for South Vietnam before what would surely be the final chapter in its struggle with the Communists in the North.

That interval proved to be just over two years in duration. The North Vietnamese conquered Saigon on April 30, 1975. And Frank Snepp, the top CIA analyst of North Vietnamese political affairs, was there up to the last moment, and writes now in extensive rage at what he calls the institutional disaster that led to our surrendering not so much the country of South Vietnamese as those special figures in that country, about 30,000, who trusted in us, worked for their country through us, and were left to die or be tortured because of our autohypnosis.

Frank Snepp is a North Carolinian who majored in Elizabethan literature at Columbia University, went back for graduate work in international affairs, was recruited into the CIA, spent five years in South Vietnam, and quit the agency early in 1976 to write this controversial book.

In May of 1977, he promised CIA Director Stansfield Turner to abide by Mr. Snepp's contract with the CIA and to show the agency the finished book, for reasons of national security. He broke that promise, and is apparently impenitent.

The controversy is, therefore, in two parts: One, do

we need a law that effectively keeps ex-CIA agents from brokering national interests? And, two, was the United States, for whatever reason or reasons, guilty of a vile indifference to those who trusted in us?

The examiner today is Dr. Colin Gray, who will be introduced more extensively in due course.

I should like to begin by asking Mr. Snepp to focus first on the second point. Specifically, at what point did you, as a CIA analyst, know that the North Vietnamese were both intending to march to Saigon and able to do so?

FRANK SNEPP: In early April of '75 we received -- I believe it was about the 8th of April -- an intelligence report which indicated the Communists would move on Saigon in due course, a very short period of time, that they would not stop for any kind of negotiated settlement. That seemed to nail it down, because this particular agent was an extremely good one. He had helped predict the '68 offensive, '72 offensive, had called the shot at every turn since then.

So, I would say, from that point forward, it was apparent to many of us down the line that the Communists were prepared to move on Saigon, and, again, that there was no chance for negotiating our way out of it.

That's when the evacuation planning should have begun.

BUCKLEY: Now, having become familiar with your book, I know what happened as a matter of procedure, but I would like you, if you will, to say what happens in a situation like that, procedurally. You get hold of these documents, you analyze them in the field. What then happens? What is supposed to happen? What does happen?

SNEPP: What is supposed to happen is that the intelligence reaches Washington, it is put into the various pipelines, goes to the White House, and what have you.

In the case of the report of the 8th of April, indeed, the White House was alerted to its contents. But...

BUCKLEY: The White House being, in this case, who?

SNEPP: Dr. Kissinger. He had just...

BUCKLEY: Scowcroft, Kissinger, everybody?

SNEPP: That's right. The National Security Council was alerted to what had taken place, what the agent was saying.

The problem was that Dr. Kissinger -- and I want to weigh this in -- had just come back from a Middle East shuttle, you'll recall, at the end of March. He had been unsuccessful in arranging a disengagement in the Sinai, further disengagement of Egyptian and Syrian forces. And the last thing he wanted was to translate or transmit to the world the impression that we might be prepared to abandon an ally in Southeast Asia, for that would have made it very difficult for him to continue this Middle East shuttle.

So, instead of moving ahead and pressing Ambassador Martin to begin planning adequately for the evacuation, as of the 8th of April...

BUCKLEY: Which could or could not have been done covertly?

SNEPP: Which could have been done covertly.

BUCKLEY: It could have been?

SNEPP: That's right. We at least could have begun putting together lists identifying the Vietnamese we wanted to help.

Instead of doing this, he decided to try to go back to Congress and generate a new aid package for the South Vietnamese, hoping that this would bolster the South Vietnamese morale and buy some time for a more orderly American withdrawal down the line.

BUCKLEY: Did your analysis, as transmitted, rule out any possibility of successful delaying action...

SNEPP: Absolutely.

BUCKLEY: ...by Congress?

SNEPP: Absolutely. It ruled out the idea of a delaying action through negotiations. And this was the key point. In fact, in a piece of analysis which went to the White House on the 9th of April -- again, only three weeks or so before the final collapse -- I repeated the estimated provided to us by our primary agent that there was no chance for negotiations, that this was a chimera.

We continued to get information to this effect as time went on. Dr. Kissinger continued to press Congress for additional aid. And Ambassador Martin; the CIA station chief, Tom Polgar, became increasingly diverted by the prospects for some kind of negotiated way out, and let our evacuation planning idle.

BUCKLEY: Let me ask you this now: At this critical juncture there were two possibilities. One -- two technical possibilities. One was negotiation, and the other was military intervention. Now, you say that negotiation, you had concluded by early April, would not work. Had you also concluded that military inter-

vention would not work, or, in fact, that it was romantic to assume that it would be made available?

SNEPP: Well, Tom Polgar, the CIA station chief, had concluded, as of the beginning of April, the military situation was irretrievable; and that was the thrust of my analysis as well, and I think the thrust of the analysis by the Defense attache.

The question was: after assuming this, was it possible to persuade the North Vietnamese to hold up and not move on Saigon? Was there a way to fool the North Vietnamese into negotiating with us?

BUCKLEY: If there was no effective sanction, what reason would there have been for the North Vietnamese to have held back? And what was it that -- what was it that bewitched Mr. Polgar, other than his Hungarian background, or what was it that bewitched Mr. Martin?

SNEPP: Several things. First of all, Ambassador Martin was, I think, personally committed to hanging on there, despite whatever the intelligence said. He had lost an adopted son in Vietnam. He was emotionally committed to keeping the ship together.

Mr. Polgar was of the same mind. He also had been in touch with the Hungarian truce team in Saigon, on and off, and the truce team was -- and particularly as time went on, into the middle of April -- was underscoring the impression that there was a chance for negotiations.

Finally, the French, very early in April, weighed in with the same message, that there was a chance for a negotiated ending, and that they, the French, could negotiate it.

In addition, Polgar concluded that the North Vietnamese wouldn't want to take Saigon militarily, because it would be so difficult for them to rationalize to their Soviet and Chinese allies, if you will. He felt that the North Vietnamese would much rather seize power through political means, because then they could maintain the myth that there was an insurrection in the South, and so forth. And this was the tracking of his thinking.

And again, all of it was very rationale. All of it made a great deal of sense, except it did not coincide with what the intelligence said.

BUCKLEY: Uh-huh.

Now, what efforts did you make, if any, to transcend -- to transcend the orders that then came down from Washington, which you...

SNEPP: And the myopia and the inertia.

BUCKLEY: ...sort of inconsistent with reality?

SNEPP: Well, I did something which is considered by many of my colleagues to be unprofessional. I began thinking very seriously of ways to get the message back to Washington around the Ambassador and around the CIA station chief. I began leaking to reporter friends of mine what our agents were telling us, trying to get them to, again, fold into their news stories the idea that there was no chance for negotiations. I also dealt with a congressional fact-finding team in Saigon at the time, one of whom was Dick Moose, who is now an Assistant Secretary of State, passed the same message on to him: no chance for negotiations.

And the terrible thing was that the press, although they would listen to me and knew me to be a reliable source, because I had been one of the embassy's primary briefers, chose instead to accept what the Ambassador was telling them, and that was that there was a chance for negotiations.

Besides, the press had been, in a way, diverted from the priority of moving ahead with an evacuation because they were already moving out their own Vietnamese employees. So they didn't feel this urgency to bring to Washington's attention the idea that the Communists were preparing to move on Saigon, without provision for any kind of ceasefire or truce.

BUCKLEY: Just to give us a perspective on your own thinking: Your concern at this point was limited to helping those Vietnamese who had staked their fortunes and their lives...

SNEPP: That's right. I felt it was a matter of honor.

BUCKLEY: Right. You were not talking about anything that could conceivably have reversed the tide of events involving all of Vietnam.

SNEPP: No.

BUCKLEY: You were prepared, subjectively at least, or objectively, to abandon South Vietnam but not to abandon discrete South Vietnamese.

SNEPP: Well, as an intelligence officer, I felt that the evidence was absolutely irrefutable that this was beyond repair at this point. Things had been allowed to go along too far. And the only thing we could hope for was to save the Vietnamese, again, who had so depended on us. And, again, I think this is basically a responsibility of an intelligence officer. He must not abandon the spies he's recruited, the collaborators, no matter how disreputable they may be to the outside world.

BUCKLEY: Well, your concern for matters of honor in the intelligence community does, or does not, impinge on your declaration of personal independence respecting the publication of intelligence secrets which you have sworn to withhold?

SNEPP: Well, I regard that question as being highly complex, and in it also is a matter of honor.

BUCKLEY: We specialize in complex questions here.

SNEPP: First of all, going back to -- or, tracking back into the question: When I entered the CIA, I did sign, as all CIA employees do, a secrecy agreement. This secrecy agreement requires that the agency employee not write or say anything about his employment without agency clearance. Secondly, it provides that you can go to the inspector general of the agency if you have a grievance, and that he will see that you get some kind of satisfaction.

I did that, unlike others who've written about the CIA, Marchetti, Marks, who was not a member of the CIA, by the way, and Agee; they did not seek redress within the agency for their grievances. I did, and was rebuffed.

And at the same time, I discovered that William Colby, Dr. Kissinger, and various other officials, including Assistant Secretary of State Habib, were leaking their versions of what had taken place in Saigon's final weeks and months to the press in order to polish up their reputations.

I felt this was an abuse of the secrecy system and I felt that my obligations under the secrecy agreement were abrogated as a result. Perhaps I was wrong and this is an expression of hubris, but I believe secrets must be maintained by everybody, not merely by the lower-ranking officials in the State Department or the CIA.

BUCKLEY: Well, how would you handle a situation in which, let's say, William Colby, if he were sitting here, would say, "You structured your own priorities in breaking your promise, respecting the publication of this book. We observed our own priorities in early April in deciding that any move that suggested that we thought that the capture of Saigon was imminent might have precipitated that capture"?

SNEPP: Well, I think that's a post facto rationalization. As a matter of fact, Dr. Kissinger has argued that if we had moved ahead with our evacuation planning, it's very possible that it would have brought on panic within Saigon, which would have made an evacuation impossible, which would have made any kind of negotiated settlement impossible.

Well, Dr. Kissinger hasn't read his cable traffic, because it was very clear in early April that Saigon had been cordoned off against the rampaging South Vietnamese Army on the outskirts and against refugees. It had become a vacuum; it had become an island in the center of this chaos. And we could have moved ahead with some kind of contingency planning without precipitating, again, an immediate collapse. This was possible.

Secondly, Ambassador Martin explicitly refuted the idea that an evacuation, or planning for such, might bring on a premature end. He did this in a cable to Kissinger on the 17th of April.

So, I think Dr. Kissinger, and others who spoke along these lines, using, again, the specter of chaos and panic as an excuse for not moving ahead, were not really reading the information coming in from the CIA station in Saigon. It's not the first time, but I think they were engaging, though, in wishful thinking.

BUCKLEY: Let me ask you this: What -- you make the rather electrifying point in your book that Watergate was the one strategic -- the one strategic event that Kissinger could not reasonably have anticipated in 1972.

Assuming that there had been no Watergate, might his actions in April of 1975 have been different? Or had the damage of Watergate -- in the Church Amendments, and so on and so forth -- already made it impossible to reverse the military situation?

SNEPP: I think that -- that is such a loaded question. You really have to ask what the North Vietnamese thought about the United States and about President Nixon. Nixon's reputation as an unpredictable adversary had certainly been a deterrent to them. I think if Nixon had remained in the saddle, there had been no Watergate, the North Vietnamese would have thought twice about moving -- or, let us say, preparing for a final offensive against the city. They would have been far more circumspect in approaching their strategic objectives, which was, finally, the capture of Saigon, had always been such, and would have remained so from time immemorial.

BUCKLEY: As Dung's book pointed out.

SNEPP: Exactly. Exactly.

So, it's really a matter, again, of the North Vietnamese perspective, if we're going to talk about the impact of Watergate. And I think their perspective would have been different. They would have been more cautious.

BUCKLEY: Would their perspective have changed if the Paris Accords had been given to Congress to ratify?

SNEPP: I think Congress's perspectives would have been changed. I think Congress might have realized that the imperfect peace Dr. Kissinger had negotiated, which left something like, oh, 145,000 NVA forces in the South, that this required some extraordinary measures: continuing aid to South Vietnam at high levels, and perhaps, sad to say, some kind of reconstruction aid to the North Vietnamese, which would have tamped down their militaristic tendencies, at least have given the moderates in North Vietnam something to battle the hawks with.

BUCKLEY: [Unintelligible]

SNEPP: That's right. That's right.

But Kissinger never leveled with Congress about the necessity of this kind of aid, both to the South and the North, in specific terms. He did in general terms, but he never got down to cases.

BUCKLEY: Was that -- there was a big Watergate factor there, was there not?

SNEPP: Precisely so.

BUCKLEY: I mean if -- we're talking now to January of 1973...

SNEPP: That's right.

BUCKLEY: ...when there was a huge self-confidence after the biggest electoral victory in the history of the United States.

SNEPP: But Haldeman was already coming under fire. The White House staff was already, again, the subject of all sorts of criticism in the press. And I think, if I may put thoughts into Kissinger's mind, which I don't in the book, I think probably he felt it would be the better part of wisdom not to be completely candid with Congress about all of these very difficult aspects, or tangential aspects to the Paris Accords: aid to the South, aid to the North at very high levels.

BUCKLEY: Well, let me ask you this: Is it your opinion that the essential terms of the Paris Accords were realistic, or were they, in effect, an affirmation of a suicidal fatalism?

SNEPP: Well, I think that it depends on what particular provisions you're talking about. I think the...

BUCKLEY: Viewed as a whole.

SNEPP: Well, viewed as a whole, it was a sellout. It was a sellout of South Vietnamese interests to the North.

BUCKLEY: Therefore, Thieu was exactly correct to have opposed them.

SNEPP: Oh, I think so. I think he was exactly correct in charging that the United States was paying more attention to its own interests and very little to his.

And, again, if Kissinger could have in some way arranged a North Vietnamese withdrawal from South Vietnam, I think the scenario in the final two years -- or, there wouldn't have been two years. Perhaps the South Vietnamese regime, for better or worse, would have continued to exist. But, of course, it was impossible, because the North Vietnamese made it quite clear that if we wanted to get back our prisoners of war, they had to get something, and the most important thing they had to get was some kind of leverage in the South, leverage which would enable them to vie politically with the South Vietnamese, since they had lost their cadre structure, their agent networks, their supporters in the South to the Phoenix program, which has been much maligned but in fact was very effective in wiping out the Communist political structure.

They had not option but to move -- but to use their forces as their instrument. So they insisted that that be part of the Paris Accords, that they be allowed to keep those forces in South Vietnam.

BUCKLEY: Was there, in your opinion, at that point a deployable pressure exercisable by the United States that could have brought about that retreat?

SNEPP: Well, certainly we could have, I think, modified the North Vietnamese intentions, induce some kind of caution on their part, if the bombing -- if the threat of bombing had been maintained. In other words, the War Powers Act and the Cambodian bombing legislation of 1973 removed the threat which the United States could exercise, bring to bear on the North Vietnamese psychology. And as a result, the North Vietnamese had nothing to hold them back.

And there was another part of this strategic of Kissinger's. It was the carrot, and the carrot was aid to North Vietnam, so, again, their aggressive tendencies might have been modified through a refocusing of their attentions on domestic priorities, the great problems they had with reconstruction in the North.

But all this went by the board.

BUCKLEY: Well, the Paris Accords were January. The restrictive acts of Congress were mid-summer.

SNEPP: That's right.

BUCKLEY: Now...

SNEPP: But, you'll recall, all during the spring of 1973, there was terrific, mounting criticism in Congress of the bombing. And it seemed, I think -- it certainly was apparent to us in Saigon that the continuation of that bombing was being brought into question. And there was all sorts of discussion among the...

BUCKLEY: You mean any thought of resuming it. You don't mean the continuation. It had ended in...

SNEPP: Well, there was continuing bombing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail system.

BUCKLEY: In what...

SNEPP: In Laos.

BUCKLEY: In what month?

SNEPP: Well, it was continuing into the spring of 1973. The threat that that could be brought to bear or escalated was the instrument -- was the stick to the carrot of aid to North Vietnam, in terms of reconstruction aid.

BUCKLEY: Well, then, if there had not been a Watergate, if the January accords had been viewed as a guaranty by the Chief Executive, in effect endorsed by Congress, we might have had a viable situation; but not under the circumstances, is your point, isn't it?

SNEPP: That's right. Under the circumstances, it was impossible.

I think there was -- there is a corollary to what you're suggesting, something we should bring into consideration. The United States Government did the same thing in Vietnam that it had done in China in the late 1940s. It tolerated the leaders, or our clients, if you will, if you want to use a loaded term, or our allies, if you don't -- it had tolerated them in their most self-defeating policies. We tolerated their corruption. There was no question that corruption was at very high levels in South Vietnam. It was siphoning off much of the aid we were delivering to the South Vietnamese.

Now, I think if we had hoped, or were hoping to preserve our experiment in South Vietnam, we should have insisted that Thieu get rid of corrupt officials, that he put his own house in order. And that was never part of our strategy, it seemed. And one of the reasons it wasn't was that we would have had then to call into question certain of our own policies. We would have had to say, "Look,

maybe we weren't so right in supporting Thieu to the limit. Maybe he's not the pristine, pure leader we would -- or, ally we would hope he is." And I think we were tripping over our egos in that respect.

Again, that had to be done. We had to insist the South Vietnamese put their house in order so that they could better use the aid we would have provided, under any circumstances.

BUCKLEY: I'm familiar with the argument, and, of course, you make it in your book. I've never found it entirely convincing, I guess because it is really like asking a people to repeal their culture.

SNEPP: Exactly.

BUCKLEY: Now, when we made a commitment to supply Russia during the war, and England, we made it with the foreknowledge that about 60% of our shipping was going to be sunk. This still meant that there was 40% that would get there that wouldn't otherwise have got there.

Now, it is spiritually galling when what you send to an ally -- when that part of what you send there isn't used, isn't used not because it got shot down en route, but because somebody translates it into a Swiss bank account.

But, strategically, that is a sentimental consideration and one that ought not to stand in the way of the exertion of the national interest, isn't it?

SNEPP: Exactly.

BUCKLEY: Now, we can't, it seems to me, simultaneously deal with a country in which corruption is endemic, as it is there, as it is, I think, in most parts of the world, actually, come to think of it, and at the same time fight a war.

Now, you're handling of Thieu strikes me as ambivalent. Did he simply refuse to fight corruption because he felt that he could not handle a second front, or was it that he was indifferent to it?

SNEPP: Exactly. He was not -- certainly not indifferent or unaware of the corruption that was decimating his logistical system. What he was concerned about was maintaining, as you suggest, his second front. He did not want to alienate the generals on whom his own regime was based. And if he had said, "Look, tighten your belts. Get out of the black market line," many of them might have backed off, and his regime would have been weakened. There's no question about it.

SNEPP: There is something we could have done outside of simply insisting that Thieu get rid of corruption. And that is, we could have at least leveled with ourselves about the impact of corruption on what was taking place, on South Vietnamese military capabilities. We didn't do that. In fact, very early on...

BUCKLEY: You mean -- "we" meaning?

SNEPP: The United States Government, the CIA...

BUCKLEY: The CIA didn't, either?

SNEPP: That's right. Very early on, CIA Headquarters in Washington was putting together an estimate on corruption. George Carver, who was an expert on Vietnam, and so forth, weighed in to modify this estimate, to suggest that corruption really wasn't very important.

Now, it was important, because as American aid to South Vietnam got cut back, little of the -- there was little spillover. Little of the money, the aid we provided to the South Vietnamese sort of filtered down to the fellows on the front lines. They became demoralized, as a result. The economy was in a mess.

So, what had enabled them to stay afloat, the little guys, the men in the trenches, was no longer available, and morale was affected by the extent of corruption; and Congress, of course, wouldn't vote additional aid.

So, what happened was that reporting which dealt with corruption was simply washed out of our channels. It didn't get back to Washington.

There was a marvelous memo that I remember. It was written by the political counselor at the Embassy in Saigon, in which he says, "We can't put this report on Thieu's peccadillos in banking in South Vietnam" -- he was engaged in some very shady dealings -- "We can't send this back to Washington because it might leak to Jack Anderson."

Well, when that sort of consideration limits your reporting capacity and you stop sending information back for that reason, then you're in trouble. And we were, increasingly, as time went on.

BUCKLEY: Well, aren't we -- aren't you really making two points? One the one you made, and the second that there seems to be no effective security in the transmission of information. Your book hasn't helped -- hasn't inspired confidence in the security of future communications, has it?

SNEPP: Well, my book -- what I hope my book has done is to give some of the older case officers in the CIA pause, cause

them to review their own -- their own approach to reporting, so that, well, in the future, if they consider letting their own opinions intrude on the reporting techniques and procedures, they'll hold up, because they'll say, "Ah, I remember that son of a gun, what is his name, Snepp. He wrote a book about -- well, maybe I have a Snepp in my ranks, and maybe I'd better be a little more careful."

If I've done that, then I've accomplished something. And, in fact, that's about all I can accomplish; nothing more. I don't pretent to be a reformer. But that would be useful.

Now, going back to the point of whether I have broken security -- I sort of dodged off that question earlier. I have not betrayed any secrets in my book, or in public appearance, or what have you, that would endanger any of the Vietnamese we left behind, because that would make my book a mockery. It would -- one of the reasons I wrote it was because I was so exercised over our betrayal, I think, of the Vietnamese who had worked for the CIA and the Embassy, who are now in such deep trouble.

So, I made a conscious effort to get around dealing with sources and methods and what have you. In fact, in a recent issue of Newsweek magazine, Admiral Turner, although very concerned about my book, mentions -- he says, "Even Snepp," he says, "is circumspect in dealing with secrets and sources in his book." So I take that as sort of a definitive statement from the CIA that I have not endangered national security by simply calling certain CIA officials and Dr. Kissinger on their mistakes.

There is a difference, of course, between blowing the whistle and, again, betraying the national interest. And if I'm beginning to sound a little self-righteous, I apologize. But I'm very sensitive to that point.

BUCKLEY: Well, I'm not out of sympathy with you, probably because I share your indignation at what we did; in my case, not only a specific indignation about what we did to people who helped us in the CIA, but also a more general indignation about what we did to the whole country.

But it does seem to me that there is no way for Stan Turner to cope with the larger point. The larger point is that your book has advertised a dreadful sin of commission by the United States; and I can't see how it can help but to affect people who trust their future to our loyalty in other frontiers of strife, whether in the Mideast or in Latin America or wherever. People who step forward to cooperate with the CIA for the best patriotic reasons can point to this Snepp book and say, "America's tradition of looking after us if the situation turns sour is not very impressive."

SNEPP: Well, hopefully, my book will help to prevent that kind of thing in the future. In other words, I'd take that and turn it around. I would say if you don't have whistle-blowers, if you don't have people who will call the agency on its mistakes, then the agency will be less inclined in the future to protect those who do depend on it.

And the agency, you see, was preparing, after the collapse of Vietnam, to ignore what had taken place. It did not want to learn what had gone wrong or to acknowledge its own mistakes to itself. And when that happens, then I think we're in trouble.

May I read something here...

BUCKLEY: Sure.

SNEPP: ...which -- this is a quote from Admiral Turner, in The Harford Courant. He was speaking at Yale.

BUCKLEY: Dated?

SNEPP: Dated December 10th, 1977, a few weeks after my book came out. He said, "I haven't read Snepp's book, but I'm not really interested in learning the history of what went wrong there in Vietnam, because I don't think it will be repeated. Mr. Snepp's book is a piece of history that is not particularly relevant" -- relevant -- "and Mr. Snepp is not qualified to tell it."

Well, that's the kind of attitude I want to try to change.

BUCKLEY: Yeah. I hope -- I hope Stan Turner didn't say anything that silly.

SNEPP: Well, perhaps The Hartford Courant is misquoting him.

BUCKLEY: Let's hope -- let's be charitable and hope it did, because Stan Turner is a man of...

SNEPP: Of great integrity and sensitivity.

BUCKLEY: Yeah. He is a man of formidable academic background. He was a Rhodes Scholar. He did his best, when he was in charge of the school at Newport, the college, to...

SNEPP: To shake it up and make it...

BUCKLEY: Well, to shake it up, and, moreover, to give it a certain academic and historical depth.

The notion that your book is unimportant is so prepos-

terous that I hate to think that the bureaucratization of Stan Turner has proceeded at such a pace as to make that...

SNEPP: Well, the thing that worried me about this remark was that, obviously, it was off the wall, and he was reacting out of anger. And this, too, is a very interesting -- this is an interesting point, because if only the agency would not engage in sort of knee-jerk reactions to -- I hate to say sensible dissidents or sensible critics, people who try to do a little whistle-blowing within the parameters of national security; if it paid more attention to them, or at least looked at the cases, then, perhaps, the agency would be in better position to reform itself.

Does that sound contentious?

BUCKLEY: Of course, its tradition was not to react at all.

SNEPP: That's right.

BUCKLEY: And I'm kind of nostalgic for those days.

SNEPP: Right.

BUCKLEY: Because it seems to me it would be much better for Admiral Turner to say, "We make no comments about books on -- attacks on the CIA."

SNEPP: But Admiral Turner is a military man, and he's not used to subordinates stepping out of line, and he, I think, let his emotions get out of hand. I trust it won't happen again.

BUCKLEY: Well, the -- to dispose of the point, your book is clearly important and is bound to be read widely in the United States by two classes of people: those Americans who are anxious to read about the last days of a huge national enterprise, and those others who want to catch, before they finally escape, some of the moral implications of what we did.

SNEPP: Well, I trust you're right. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure you're right, though. As I've traveled around the country, I find sort of a resounding indifference to what went wrong. Vietnam still remains such a trauma, people don't want to focus on it.

BUCKLEY: My point does not conflict with your own. It is quite true that more Americans, by far, wish that South Vietnam did not exist, and will go to huge lengths not to remind themselves that existed, let alone that we participated in its destruction.

SNEPP: That's right.

BUCKLEY: But the fact is that your book is a terribly important moral document. And those members of the moral clerisy in America who care are bound to consult it.

SNEPP: Well, you're kind of say -- I hope it will have a more practical effect. There are about a hundred thousand Indochinese refugees tucked away in hell holes called refugee camps in Thailand. And the United States -- and many of them, by the way, are refugees from Vietnam, people who've come out after -- since the collapse. And if the public debate on Vietnam and our betrayal of the Vietnamese we left behind helps to push Congress in the direction of liberalizing immigration restrictions covering those refugees -- in other words, persuade Congress to let more of these people in, then that's to the good. I think we owe something to them, the people who are now scrambling out under the wire, out of Cambodia, out of Laos and Vietnam.

BUCKLEY: Well, don't you think we owe even more -- in our negotiations with North Vietnam, ought we not to lay down as a condition of rapprochement a certain regard for whoever survives from the great bloodbath?

SNEPP: Absolutely.

BUCKLEY: They now know who these 30,000 people are. Aren't we, in your opinion, obliged to concern ourselves about the treatment of them by North Vietnam, and use what purchase we have on foreign policy to cause that?

SNEPP: That should be one of the conditions of our dealing with the North Vietnamse at this point. But it hasn't been.

BUCKLEY: It seems to me, in a sense, they are our POWs, in the same sense that our nationals were.

SNEPP: Exactly. But there is very little interest in the United States, no percentage in Congress to making this part of our negotiating stance vis-a-vis the North Vietnamese.

BUCKLEY: Could that be because the high intellectual establishment in this country is, to a certain extent, contemptuous of any South Vietnamese who sided with the United States?

SNEPP: It seems so.

BUCKLEY: Because they weren't as morally informed as Jane Fonda?

SNEPP: It seems so. I was appalled the other evening -- I can't mention the individual's name. I was at a cocktail party with some members of the former antiwar establishment, a marvelous

woman, an intellectual, and so forth; but she spoke to me -- she leaned over and she said, "Look, we helped all sorts of Vietnamese during the war. In fact, this little Buddhist monk came over and we were very nice to him and we let him speak to our group and we paid attention to him."

I was stunned at the condescension of even this woman who professed to be so concerned about the Vietnamese and what we'd done to the Vietnamese, the way she treated this particular individual in speaking about him.

Now, I think that the antiwar movement's attitudes, or the former antiwar movement, if you want to call it that, needs to be changed, too, and there needs to be an education, an ongoing education of these people.

And there was an ambivalence of truth about our commitment in Vietnam, and the South Vietnamese were not all wrong, obviously, and the North Vietnamese, by God, were not all right. And anyone who says taht they were simply doesn't know his history. He ought to have gone to Vietnam and seen what they did to people who had the misfortune of being captured by them from time to time.

BUCKLEY: The examiner today is Dr. Colin Gray, a graduate of Oxford University, where he also got his postgraduate degrees. He's a professional defense analyst associated now with the Hudston Institute, author of the book "Soviet-American Arms Race," an expert in the SALT II talks, for which he serves the Hudson Institute as a consultant.

COLIN GRAY: In the first place, I'd like to say that I endorse very strongly Mr. Buckley's view that Frank Snepp's book is important, both as history and, above all else, as a moral statement.

I should explain that in my role as examiner, in this particular case, I'm speaking with the prejudices, biases, and approaches of a professional defense analyst, and I'd like to move our discussion on from matters of agency concern, matters of legislation in this country with regard to the protection, the proper protection of secrets and the proper revealing of things that should not be kept secret, really, I'd like to move us to a slightly wider canvas, perhaps to the course of the war as a whole, the kind of lessons we should learn from it. And I would endorse the comment made earlier that, really, this country, and particularly the defense and foreign policy community, with which I deal very extensively, really has not seriously begun to accommodate the proper of way of thinking about our whole Vietnam experience.

After all, you know, this is the first war since Korea. A great deal of theorizing, policymaking, etcetera, in the '50s and '60s really needs to be redone. The whole basis of a great deal of

American defense and foreign policy needs to be reassessed in the light of what happened in Vietnam.

Mr. Snepp, your book provides, really, I find, a quite devastating microscopic indictment of American policy and performance. Indeed, I find, perhaps, some difficulty in that the detail you provide is so rich, but there may be some danger of larger questions somehow being lost, sort of amidst the many trees.

This isn't really a criticism of you, since, clearly, you had a limited purpose, a purpose which I think you accomplished very well indeed.

What I'd like to do, perhaps rather than firing questions at you, is I would like to invite your comments on a somewhat personal interpretation of the Vietnam War that I hold to, beginning, perhaps, by looking at the period wherein your book begins, when you returned to Saigon in the late fall of 1972. And this is by way of being a proposition.

It's my understanding -- and I'm very willing to be corrected -- but it's my understanding that by the late fall of 1972, the war in Vietnam, perhaps to the surprise of many Americans, essentially was won by the South Vietnamese and by the United States. This impression of mine was confirmed by the tone and some of the detail provided in the opening pages of your book, where you were comparing how Vietnam was as you returned as to how Vietnam was when you left.

You know, just to recite a few facts which people may have, perhaps, forgotten: The North Vietnamese Army essentially was beaten, in fact was beaten very badly, in its Easter offensive of 1972. The North Vietnamese Army took up to 70,000 dead, it lost 700 tanks. Also, as the point was made earlier in Bill's questioning, the Viet Cong had never really recovered from the Tet offensive of early 1968. And the CORDS -- that's the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program -- the CORDS program to counter insurgency in South Vietnam had really worked extremely effectively, under Robert Komer (?), in late '67 through until the early '70s.

Which meant that by, shall we say, the late fall of 1972, the indigenous insurgency looked as if it was very well in hand, and the North Vietnamese Army had just suffered what looked like a fairly crushing defeat.

The North Vietnamese Army's 1972 offensive, the famous Easter offensive, really had nothing whatever, as far as I can see, to do with revolutionary warfare. It was an old-fashioned invasion of one country by another, very much like late 1974, early 1975 looked like: you know, regular North Vietnamese divisions, tanks, self-propelled artillery, and all the rest of it;

and it was smashed badly.

Now, in 1972, one should understand that the South Vietnamese victory really was the South Vietnamese victory. In other words -- I'd like your commentary on this -- the United States certainly played a critical role, but essentially, you know, the dying was done in 1972 by the South Vietnamese. Okay, American air power was critically important, American logistic support was very important, and the role of American advisers with the South Vietnamese Army certainly was important. But nonetheless, the dying, the standing was done, really, by the South Vietnamese.

Unfortunately, we now were in a situation, in the story I'm telling, that by late '72 the North Vietnamese Army was smashed, perhaps only temporarily but nonetheless smashed fairly definitively, and the Viet Cong has been substantially defeated.

We celebrate this victory by imposing on President Thieu, as Bill Buckley brought out in the questioning, the Paris Peace Accords of January 23rd, 1973, which left the North Vietnamese in place and were, of course, as was demonstrated, quite unenforceable.

Now, I'm left with a paradox, which I'd like your commentary on, and perhaps Bill's commentary on, also. That is, how could it be that we were really on the brink of what, for want of a better term, one would have to call, say, victory in late 1972; and then we have Saigon suffer a total defeate in April 1975?

Now, the paradox may be purely apparent. In other words, perhaps, you know, the real seeds of the South Vietnamese defeat should have been quite apparent in January 1973; so, really, the paradox is, you know, solely in my misperception.

I believe there were, you know, fairly favorable net assessments in late 1972 of the situation in the South, but nonetheless it was apparent at the time to American military observers, and Frank made this point earlier, that the Army of the Republic of Vietnam would need U.S. assistance should a major North Vietnamese offensive develop in the future, and that the Army of the Republic of Vietnamese -- that is, the South Vietnamese Army -- happened, unfortunately, to be wedded, rather substantially, to a U.S. style of combat.

BUCKLEY: You'd better formulate your question, or you're going to break the bank of our format here.

GRAY: Okay -- very heavy logistic support.

Okay. So my point is this: It looks to me, as a defense analyst, that both the conventional war and the sort of rural counterinsurgency was going very well for us in late '72. How does

one explain the paradox that there was total defeat suffered in the spring of 1975? The paradox strikes me as absolutely glaring and it strikes me that the American people, perhaps, didn't appreciate just how favorable things were in '72.

Is my reading of '72 wrong?

SNEPP: No, I think your reading of '72 is correct. And particularly after the December American bombing of North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese were reeling and they were very -- very concerned, as I said before, about Nixon's unpredictability, and this was a force for moderation on their part.

I think the first problem occurred as a result of Dr. Kissinger's refusal, again as I said before, to make it quite clear to Congress what was needed to keep the North Vietnamese at bay. It was a matter, again, of making it clear to Congress that aid was needed, both to tamp -- tamper North Vientamese aggressiveness and to keep the South Vietnamese afloat. He didn't spell this out.

At the same time, he told President Thieu at San Clemente in April 1973 that he could continue to count on American support, at very high and specific levels, for an indefinite period of time, something that he and President Nixon didn't clear with Congress. If they had only done this, then I think the South Vietnamese would have known what they had to do...

GRAY: ...in good faith?

SNEPP: It certainly seemed to have been made in good faith.

And the point is this: If the South Vietnamese had known this, had known that the American -- I should say had known that the American promise was very fragile, then they might have begun pulling in their tentacles and retrenching, if you will, and making an accommodation with the North Vietnamese. But they didn't. They figured they could continue playing a very, very hard line, to the point that they overextended themselves far beyond the American willingness to support, if you can put it that way.

So, those, I think, are the two basic factors. There's so many more. But if you want a starting point.

GRAY: I'd very much like your comment on the military events in the final -- really, in the very final months. I'm sure you would probably agree with me that the conduct of an orderly fighting retreat at the same time that you're trying to protect your civilian population that's retreating ahead of you, by the side of you, with you is one of the most difficult things to effect. And although the South Vietnamese made major military

mistakes, as you bring out very clearly in your book, I suggest as a proposition that their military behavior in late '74, and particularly '75, was almost par for the course. In other words, much better armies than the ARVN have -- almost have disintegrated under these kind of conditions.

SNEPP: Well, one of the things they were doing with their precipitous withdrawal from the Highlands, the withdrawal which brought about the unraveling of the North -- the South Vietnamese Army, one of the things they hoped to do was to win sympathy in the United States for their cause. They suddenly began to realize the United States wasn't behind them. So the way to generate sympathy and support, they felt, was to make it clear that they were on the ropes. And the way you prove that is to begin pulling back, sloughing off territory, and what have you.

What they didn't realize was that even this wouldn't rally the Americans to their side. They were trading land for nothing, for nothing at all, not for American support, not for time. And as it became apparent that's what they'd done, that was their mistake, morale disintegrated, particularly among the commanders; and that was the end.

SNEPP: Mr. Buckley?

BUCKLEY: What was my question? What was the question?

GRAY: If you would like to comment on the points I've made or upon the replies given by Frank.

BUCKLEY: Well, I think this -- I think that in January, and even in April, of '73, Mr. Kissinger felt confident that the force of the Chief Executive, combined with the force of that part of the Congress, which had always been a majority, that had supported the Vietnam War, was more than enough to make it reasonable to assume that we would live up to our end of the bargain, as, for instance, we had not in the Laotian treaty of 1962. And I think my memory is correct that he had assurance from congressional leaders that we would give -- we would maintain a certain level of aid, which, when redeemed, was in fact not forthcoming, as a result of the disintegration of the authority of the Chief Executive. In my judgment, during 1975 it would have been impossible to get Congress to raise money for Key West if Nixon had asked for it.

I think one of the most dismal scenes in my memory is that of the reception by Congress to President Ford when he asked for $700 million of aid during those critical days at the end. The utter indifference of Congress to what he was saying showed the extent to which they felt, in effect, that to give that aid would be, in some odd, poetic way, retroactively to vindicate the memory of Richard Nixon.

So, in that sense, I think that he figured much more prominently -- well, I hardly need to tell you this, having written the book, in which you make the point yourself that he figured very prominently in the end of South Vietnam.

GRAY: Okay. I don't know how much time we have left. But I'd very much like to draw upon Frank's sort of wisdom concerning the course of the war as a whole and ask him what lessons he thinks we should draw from the entire Vietnamese experience.

I'll make one or two very, very brief, this time, suggestions. I suggest, firstly, that graduated military response has been demonstrated not to work, particularly when one's opposed by an adversary who is going for total political goals. I suggest we had no strategy to beat the enemy. The adversary was permitted to take as much or as little of the war as he chooses, to misquote Sir Francis Bacon.

In Vietname, I suggest, we had a two-level problem: firstly, to help the government in Saigon to do its job, or to do its job much better, which meant we had to attend to corruption and to rural insurgency; but we also had a scarcely less important second-level task, which was to keep the North Vietnamese Army away from South Vietnam. And I suggest we did not attend with sufficient vigor and rigorousness early enough to that task.

What I suggest is that back in '64-65, had Johnson been really serious about waging the war in Southeast Asia, he should have been told by his military advisers that to keep the North Vietnamese Army out and away, which was absolutely essential to American political goals, we had possibly to invade the southern part of North Vietnam, possibly we had to take fairly direct action against the Laotian Panhandle, and eventually, certainly, we had to interdict seriously the flow of supplies through Sihanoukville, which you specify in your book as being critical, certainly at some stages of the war, to the supply of the Viet Cong.

BUCKLEY: Your comments, Mr. Snepp.

SNEPP: Well, I would agree with that, and I think that's outside my area of competence and experience.

I would say this: It is quite important to realize that if we had bombed the dikes in North Vietnam, we would have held up the North Vietnamese Army. And anyone who argues that that wasn't a possibility, wasn't a real prospect, again, ought to look at the North Vietnamese economy. They would have had to divert manpower from the South, and there would have been a stalling of the North Vietnamese war machine, but it was simply politically impossible, as we all know.

So, agreeing with the first point you made, limited war,

waged by the United States in Vietnam, was a no-go game from the very beginning, unless we were able to back it up with a great deal of force.

GRAY: I wasn't suggesting that we should have waged the war that way. What I was saying was that if the war was to be waged, the war should be waged seriously, and to wage the war seriously meant thinking seriously about these kind of things.

There's a further proposition along similar lines. I have the feeling that if the United States had managed by, say, late 1967 to have accomplished the kind of position it had achieved vis-a-vis the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army by 1972, the history would have been totally different.

In other words, your book describes, essentially, the end game, by which time the options, the political options available to the White House were absolutely minimal. By late '67, prior to the Tet offensive, had we achieved the kind of attrition of the rural Viet Cong structure, had we inflicted the kind of losses on the North Vietnamese that were inflicted in 1972, almost anything might have been possible, you know, given the fact that, you know, the American sort of dissidents against the war were still at a fairly low level.

As a sort of minor proposition, I put it to you that a great deal of the opposition to the war in Vietnam stemmed not so much from moral outrage -- that certainly was serious enough and should be taken at face value -- but it was a realization, by '67-68, that the war was being lost, there were no serious prospects of victory, and that the personal political careers of people, who having hitched to Vietnam policy in some way, might well be damaged. In other words, people bailed in '67-68, seeing the war was going badly.

SNEPP: Oh, I disagree with that point of view. I don't think the war was being lost by 1968. The Tet offensive, militarily, was a disaster for the North Vietnamese. But where it was lost was in the United States, as Ambassador Martin has said from time to time.

And a friend of mine, Don Oberdorfer, has just done a piece for The Washington Post on Tet 1968. He wrote a book, a marvelous book, on the subject. And he points up Tet was the big event on television that year, in '68. And when people saw the war spill over into the American Embassy, that, of course, had the final shattering effect on American resolve. And I think that's the beginning of the end.

And he also points out that, actually, it was the surcharge in 1967 placed on fuel that finally began to -- because of the rising costs of the war -- that finally lost Johnson the

kind of support in the United States he needed. Because suddenly the war came home to the American pocketbook, and then people began making very important bread-and-butter decisions about whether or not they were behind the war. Till then, it had been a little bit remote.

BUCKLEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Frank Snepp, author of "Decent Interval."